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An analysis of political ambition in Britain

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Peter Allen and David Cutts

Abstract: Representative democracies require sufficient numbers of citizens to put themselves forward as candidates for political office. Existing studies have shown that the composition of political institutions is not representative of the population as a whole, suggesting that political ambition is not evenly distributed among all potential candidates. We discuss evidence from the first systematic study of political ambition in Britain, examining the question of who is interested in putting themselves forward for political office. We find patterns in the distribution of political ambition that help to explain why British political institutions do not look like the British people as a whole including a gender gap, a social class gap, an education gap, a north-south divide, and a personality gap. We discuss the implications of our findings for political parties, arguing that they need to adjust practices of candidate recruitment in such a way that minimises the effects of these biases.

Keywords: political ambition; political recruitment, gender and politics; social class; political disaffection; political participation

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The continued viability of representative democracy as a system of government is contingent on sufficient numbers of citizens putting themselves forward as candidates for elected political office. More than this, many have argued that beyond the sheer number of citizens it is also desirable, indeed necessary, that candidates possess a range of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics within their ranks. This concern that the pool from which we elect our politicians contain sufficient diversity is one reflected in both popular and academic debate on the subject of political representation, and has prompted many studies of those who hold seats in British political institutions and of which characteristics are most, and least, commonly seen among those seeking to join them.¹ Less frequently examined in the British case is political ambition, a trait that is a necessary prerequisite to candidacy, but not a sufficient one. A result of this is that we know little of patterns of political ambition in Britain – who wants to run for office? Where are they located? Are they male or female, rich or poor, old or young? In this article we outline results from the most comprehensive survey to date of population-level political ambition in Britain. Our data is drawn from an original online survey conducted by YouGov of just over 10,000 respondents in England, Scotland, and Wales and was collected in March and April

¹ Lamprinakou, C., Morucci, M., Campbell, R. and van Heerde-Hudson, J., 2016. All change in the House? The profile of candidates and MPs in the 2015 British general election. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 70(2), pp.207-232.

2017. All data reported here has been weighted to deliver a nationally representative sample according to standard YouGov procedures.²

Levels of political ambition in Britain

An overwhelming majority of British people have never considered running for political office, with only 10 per cent responding that they had. In order to generate this figure, we asked people a simple question: 'Have you ever thought about putting yourself forward as a candidate for political office, for example as a local councillor or MP?' Of those who responded in the negative to this initial question, we pushed them with a further query: 'Thinking about it now, can you ever imagine yourself being interested in running for office or would you rule it out completely?' We see this second question as relating to prospective political ambition. Substantively, participants' views closely resemble the patterns seen in the initial question, with most (almost 91 per cent) responding in the negative. Suffice it to say this data suggests that although it is not the case that most people are on the fence about running for office, merely biding their time, there is a group who might be persuaded to do so under certain circumstances. Although small, the existence of this potentially malleable group matters, not least to political parties seeking to expand their candidate pools.

Among those who have considered running for political office, exactly which office(s) are they thinking of? We are able to split this data into two categories among the ambitious, distinguishing those who have taken some step towards actually becoming a candidate from those who have not. In the former group ($n=344$), those who have taken steps towards running, 21 per cent have focused on becoming a Member of the House of Commons (MP), 59 per cent a local councillor, 25 per cent a parish councillor, 27 per cent a district or county councillor, 4 per cent a Member of the European Parliament (MEP), 3 per cent a member of a legislature in another country, and then 4 per cent a member of some other legislature. Turning to respondents in only Wales and Scotland respectively, just 7 per cent (of $n=14$) have acted to become a Member of the Welsh Assembly (AM) and 18 per cent (of $n=28$) a Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP). Within the group of politically ambitious respondents who are yet to act on their ambition ($n=710$), thus far taking no actual steps towards seeking office, 31 per cent have considered becoming an MP, 60 per cent a local councillor, 17 per cent a parish councillor, 11 per cent a county or district councillor, 6 per cent an MEP, just under 1 per cent a member of a legislature in another country, and then 15 per cent who were uncertain about which legislature they would be interested in becoming a candidate for election to. Again, turning to respondents in only Wales and Scotland respectively, just 11 per cent (of $n=37$) have sought to become an AM and 33 per cent (of $n=72$) an MSP.

Briefly examining whether political ambition is consistent regardless of which party an individual identifies with (if any), we find some differences. 9.5% of individuals thinking of themselves as Conservatives ($n=2697$) have considered putting themselves

² For more details, see <https://yougov.co.uk/about/panel-methodology/>. Data collection was funded by ESRC Future Research Leaders grant ES/N002644/1.

forward as a candidate for political office compared to 12% thinking of themselves as Labour ($n=2473$), and almost 15% of those identifying themselves as Liberal Democrats ($n=665$). Among the smaller parties, the sample size is too small to make any definite pronouncements, but political ambition is higher among Greens and those identifying as Plaid Cymru than among SNP and UKIP supporters. Individuals not identifying with any party are, perhaps unsurprisingly, less ambitious, with just 8% having considered running for office.

Personal and socioeconomic profile of the politically (un)ambitious

Existing research has demonstrated, primarily in the United States, that individual characteristics such as sex, age, ethnicity, level of education, and socioeconomic status affect the extent to which people will report being politically ambitious.³ We see similar patterns in our data. There is a clear gender gap in political ambition, with British men more than twice as likely as British women to report having considered putting themselves forward as a candidate for political office, figures of 14 and 7 per cent, respectively. We were unable to detect an equivalent relationship between ethnicity and levels of political ambition. Owing to the relatively small sample size for various ethnic minority groups, we instead initially utilised a binary division between white (ethnic majority) and non-white (ethnic minority) respondents. Although a crude distinction in many ways, the increased statistical power offered by this split would more easily permit the identification of an effect in either direction. *Prima facie*, we find only a small difference between white and non-white respondents in terms of their political ambition, with 10.4 per cent of white respondents reporting some political ambition compared to 9.9 per cent of non-white respondents. As we noted, our ability to delve further into differences in ambition levels among specific ethnic groups is limited by the size of our sample. However, we can say, with this caveat, that alongside the roughly 10 per cent of white respondents expressing political ambitions of some kind, respondents of mixed ethnicity have slightly higher levels of ambition (around 13 per cent), while individuals with South Asian ethnic backgrounds have lower levels of ambition, with only 8 per cent considering putting themselves forward.

Turning to consider level of education, we find that individuals with high levels of education (primarily signalled by possession of a university degree) are roughly twice as likely as those with medium levels of education (generally completion of secondary education) to have considered running for political office, and over three times more likely than those with low levels of education (unfinished secondary education or

³ See, for example, Lawless, J.L. and Fox, R.L., 2010. *It Still Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*. Cambridge University Press.

lower).⁴ Around 14 per cent of highly-educated respondents had thought about becoming a candidate for political office; still a low figure, but notably higher than those with lower levels of formal education. Finally, looking at age, the general pattern is one of relative stability whereby ambition is more or less in line with the overall population level regardless of age, but there is one noteworthy data point. 12.8 per cent of 18 to 24 year olds have considered running, the highest level of any age group. This could be seen as youthful exuberance but, given that the question is not time delimited to recent considerations of office-seeking alone, this is not an obvious explanation. Conversely, it may well be a reflection of how these younger individuals have come of age, and political consciousness, during a period of intense political activity worldwide: between Trump and Brexit, plus two UK general elections in three years, this cohort might feel they have more skin in the political game than many others. However, such talk is necessarily speculative - our data is cross-sectional meaning that it was collected at one point in time. Consequently, we are unable to track these individuals over time and see how their political ambition develops in future.

Social grade, a measure of occupational status often utilised in discussions of social class, also has a relationship with levels of political ambition. Slightly over 12 per cent of individuals from social grade ABC1 (including the upper, middle, and lower middle classes) reported having considered running for political office compared to just under 8 per cent of respondents classified in social grade C2DE (skilled working class, working class, and not working). Turning to look at subjective measures of class - that is, asking respondents to indicate whether they *feel* they are part of a specific social class - we see similar patterns, although it should be noted that most people classify themselves as either middle class ($n=3842$), lower class ($n=1411$), or as not being part of any specific class ($n=4464$). This aside, of the 39 individuals who did classify themselves as being upper class, 28% had considered putting themselves forward for political office. This compares to 12% of self-declared middle-class and lower-class respondents and 9% of those who did not consider themselves members of any particular social class. Although far from offering definitive evidence either way, this is in the same direction as the findings based on more objective measures. We also examine how political ambition varies dependent on a respondent's personal gross income. Shown in Figure 1, which compares each income bracket to the overall sample percentage, the pattern is relatively clear: although low income has only a marginal dampening effect on political ambition, this effectively levelling out as an individual approaches the median national income, the amplifying effect that increased levels of income beyond the norm has on levels of political ambition is sizeable. Individuals earning between thirty and forty thousand pounds are just shy of 2% more likely to have considered running for office than the average Briton, while

⁴ This measure of education is the same as that used, and based on the calculation outlined, in Evans, G. and Tilley, J., 2017. *The New Politics of Class: The Political Exclusion of the British Working Class*. Oxford University Press.

individuals earning over fifty, seventy, and one hundred thousand pounds are 9, 11, and 13 per cent more likely to have considered this, respectively. Although perhaps unsurprising given the increasing professionalisation of politics and its dominance by the degree-holding middle class, these findings offer support for recent contentions that the working class are increasingly excluded from British political life.⁵

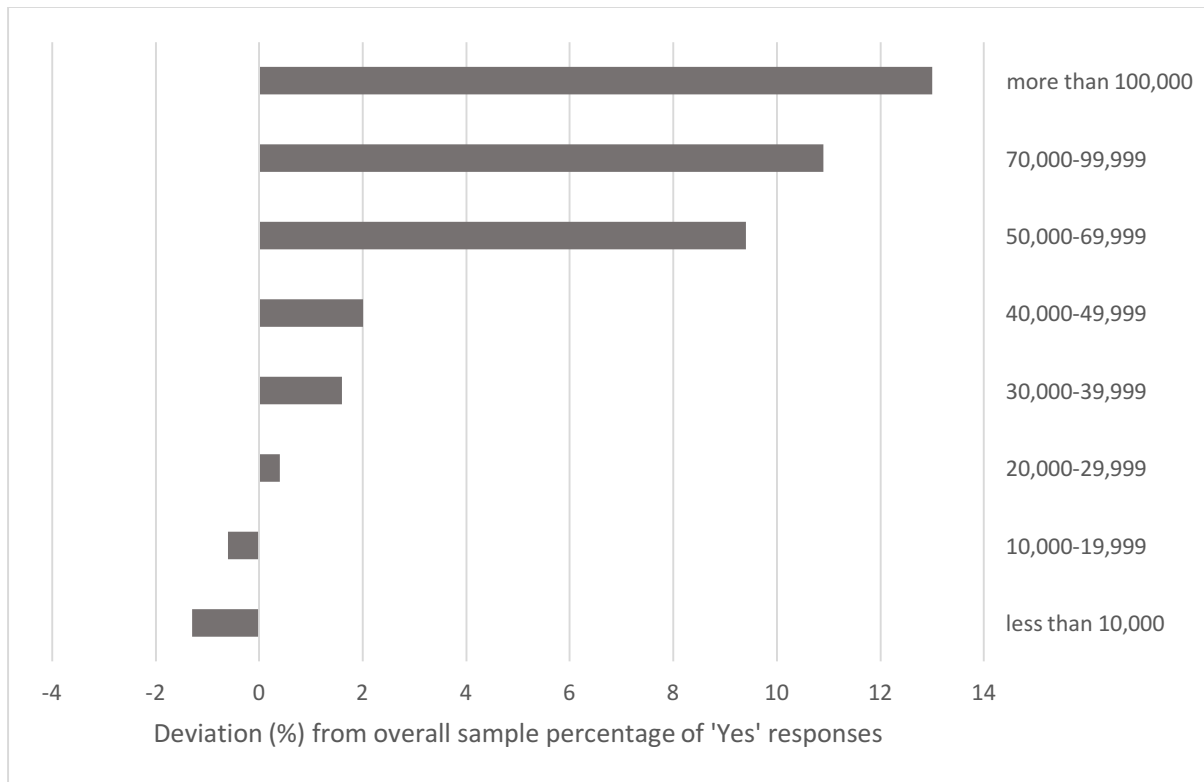


Figure 1 – Gross personal income and levels of political ambition

Figure 2 summarises the variation in levels of political ambition across key demographic subgroups by taking the overall sample's level of political ambition and comparing the reported ambition of each subgroup as defined by the listed characteristic. So, for example, the level of ambition among men is 4 per cent higher than the sample as a whole, while it is almost 4 per cent lower for women. Reflecting on the contents of Figure 2, we can see that, in terms of individual characteristics, a highly-educated relatively young man from social grade ABC1 is more likely to be politically ambitious than any other kind of person.

⁵ Evans, G. and Tilley, J., 2015. The new class war: Excluding the working class in 21st-century Britain. *Juncture*, 21(4), pp.298-304.

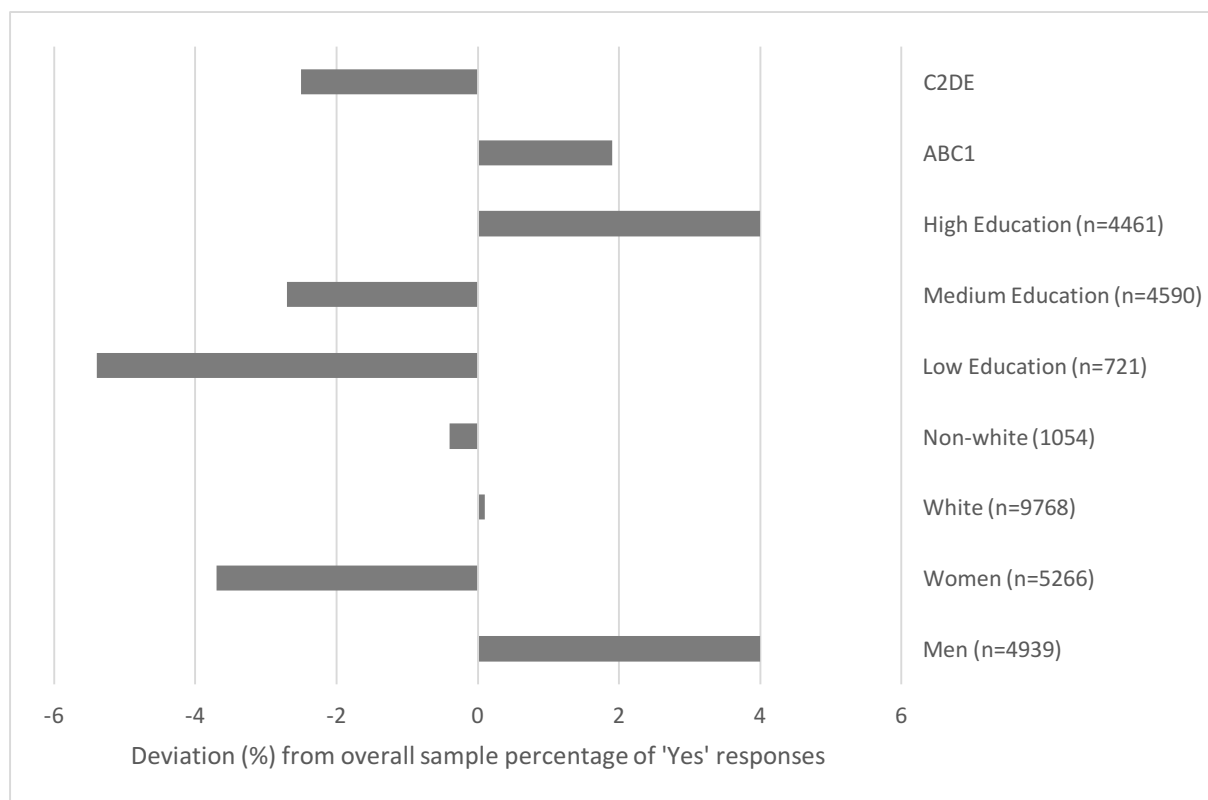


Figure 2 – Percentage of respondents within subgroups of individual characteristics reporting political ambition compared to overall sample.

The north-south divide in political ambition

A key strand of the popular discussion around the British 'political class' focuses on its supposed London-centrism or broader cosmopolitanism.⁶ Arguing that London elites are out of touch with 'ordinary people', it has been posited that individuals living far from the 'Westminster bubble' are less likely to consider becoming involved in it, or in politics more generally, than those who reside in closer proximity to it. Our data permits some examination of this question. Figure 3 shows how the average level of political ambition expressed by respondents varies in comparison to the sample as a whole depending on the area of the UK in which they live. So, for example, in Figure 3 we can see that just under 2 per cent more respondents in the South West expressed some kind of political ambition than in the sample taken as a whole. Overall, the data does offer some support for the view outlined above, with respondents in the south of Britain, broadly defined to include the South West (12.2%), South East (11.3%), and London (11.1%) being considerably more ambitious than respondents in the North East (7.9%), North West (8.7%), and Yorkshire and the Humber (9%). These patterns are mirrored by those in electoral turnout at the 2017 general election, with the South

⁶ Jennings, W. and Stoker, G., 2016. The bifurcation of politics: two Englands. *The Political Quarterly*, 87(3), pp.372-382.

West (71.8%), the South East (71.2%), and London (70.1%) the three highest areas of turnout, and the North East (66%) the lowest among the English regions.

Of course, this might be an aggregated product of the individual-level differences discussed earlier – the south is wealthier in general, for example – but it does highlight the need for further research to help unpack these contextual and compositional influences.

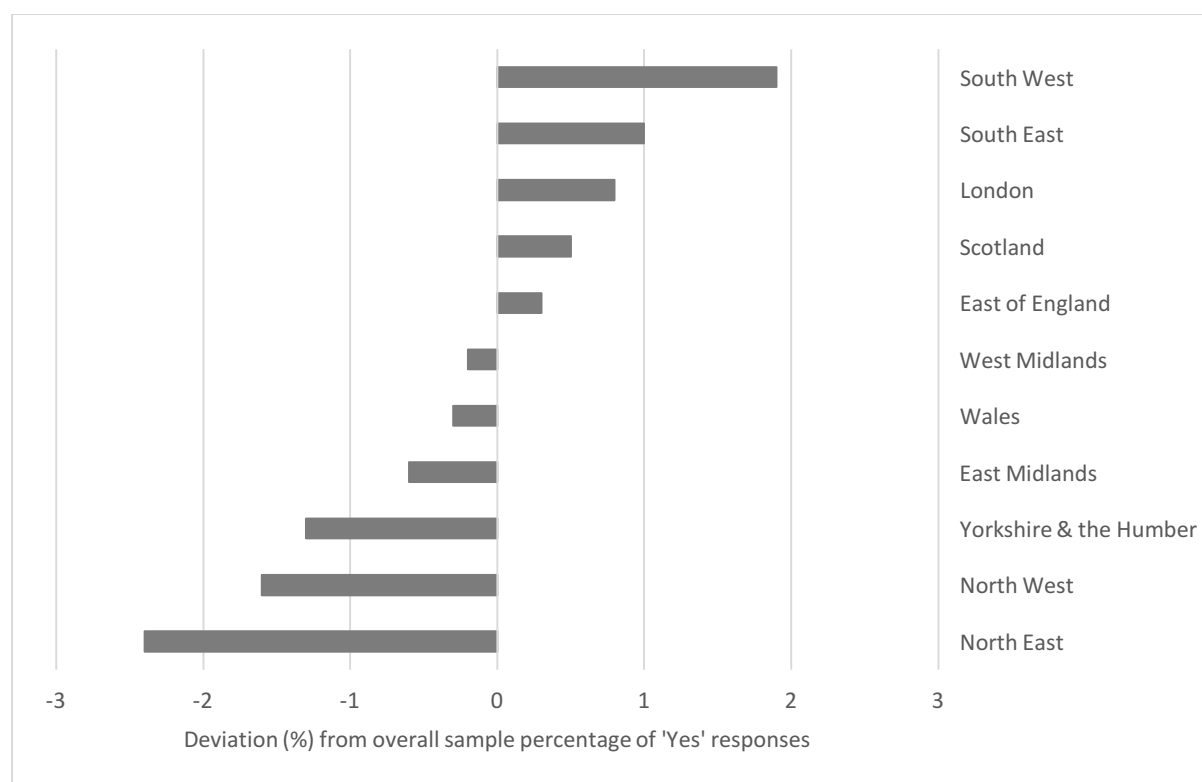


Figure 3 – Levels of political ambition by UK region

All in the family: political socialisation and political ambition

A further element of the political class narrative described above, and also related to the notion that the political world is something of a closed shop, is the sense that political dynasties of parents, siblings, spouses, and children are disproportionately likely to produce candidates for office compared to families who are less politically involved. To explore this, we asked respondents whether they remembered their parents being involved in politics in a number of different ways when they were growing up. These included involvement in a political party, non-partisan activism, being an MP, being a local councillor, and participation in trade union activities. In line with expectations, individuals whose parents were involved in political activities throughout their childhood express far greater interest in running for office than individuals whose parents were not involved at all. Although the sample size for some of these groups is small (only 32 respondents had parents who had sat as MPs, for example), the higher levels of political ambition within them is notable. Just over 19 per cent of respondents whose parents were local councillors (n=216) had considered running for political office, 38 per cent with parents who were MPs (n=32), 22 per cent

party members (457), 24 per cent non-partisan political activists (104), 16 per cent trade union members (n=1119), and 20 per cent of respondents whose parents were trade union officials (n=327). These figures compare to 9 per cent of those whose parents were not involved in any of these activities (n=7418) and to just 5 per cent of those who were unsure or could not recall (n=1083).

Figure 4 illustrates how the percentage of respondents indicating some political ambition within each of these subgroups compares to the percentage doing so in the sample as a whole. It is clear that a filial connection exists – having parents who are active in politics during individuals’ political socialisation makes a difference to the political ambitions of their offspring.

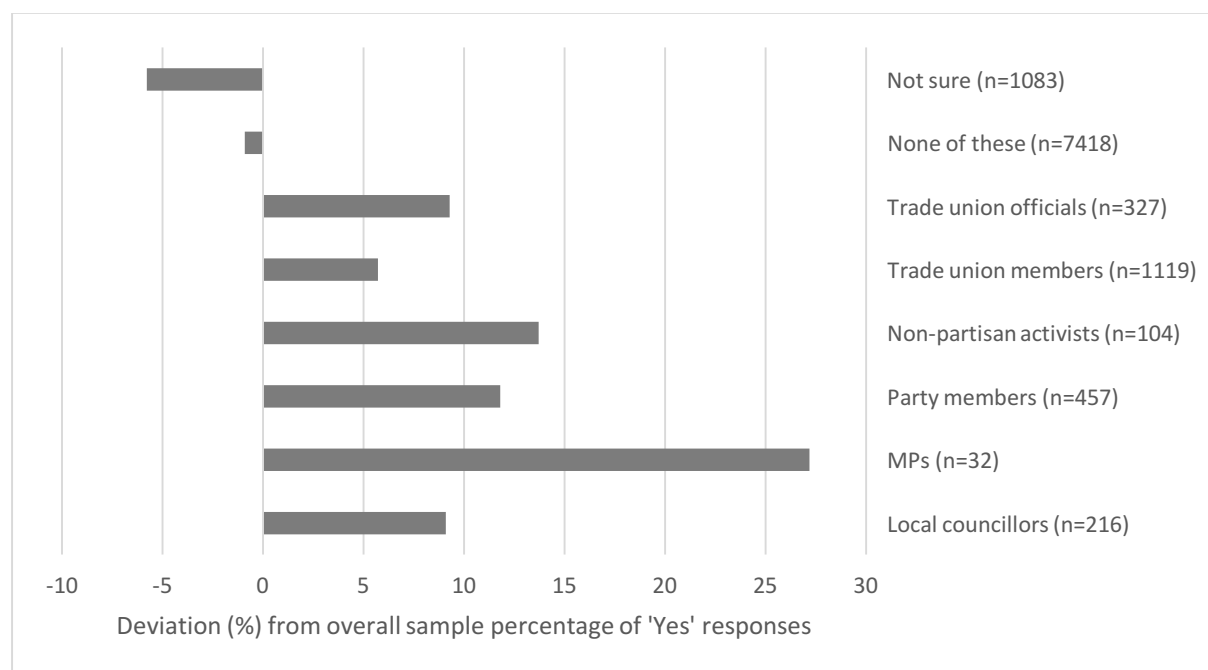


Figure 4 – Parental involvement in politics during childhood

Personality and political ambition

The ‘Big Five’ personality traits are well-established in psychological studies and have increasingly been found to correlate with various kinds of political behaviours and attitudes. These include partisan attachments, propensity to participate in political life, and preferences in terms of which political activities to pursue. A limited number of studies have explored the relationship between personality and political ambition, though these have largely focused on already incumbent legislators, not the general public as a whole. To address the role of personality in political ambition, we presented respondents with a short question battery that measures the Big Five known

as the TIPI (Ten Item Personality Inventory).⁷ The Big Five factors themselves are 'Extraversion', 'Agreeableness', 'Conscientiousness', 'Emotional Stability', and 'Openness to Experience'. How might we expect these to relate to individual levels of political ambition? People high in extraversion are, as the name would suggest, extraverted. They are outgoing and enjoy social interaction and one would expect, therefore, that the plethora of interpersonal encounters involved in running for political office will not deter them. In fact, it might even be attractive. Individuals scoring highly in agreeableness are often found to be kind, comforting, and sympathetic. Although these might be traits that the public desires in political candidates, one might equally expect that the candidates themselves are likely to be somewhat more cool and steely. Conscientious people are organized, dutiful, and reliable, again traits that voters might desire in an ideal candidate for political office, but ones which might not play well with the unpredictability of the political world. Emotional stability is a factor associated with calmness, consistency, and being relaxed, traits which may be preferable among political decision-makers. Finally, individuals exhibiting high levels of openness to experience are likely to seek out the unknown, put themselves in new and unusual situations, and generally embrace whatever life throws at them. As such, one might expect individuals who strongly exhibit this trait to be more likely to have considered running for office than those who do not.

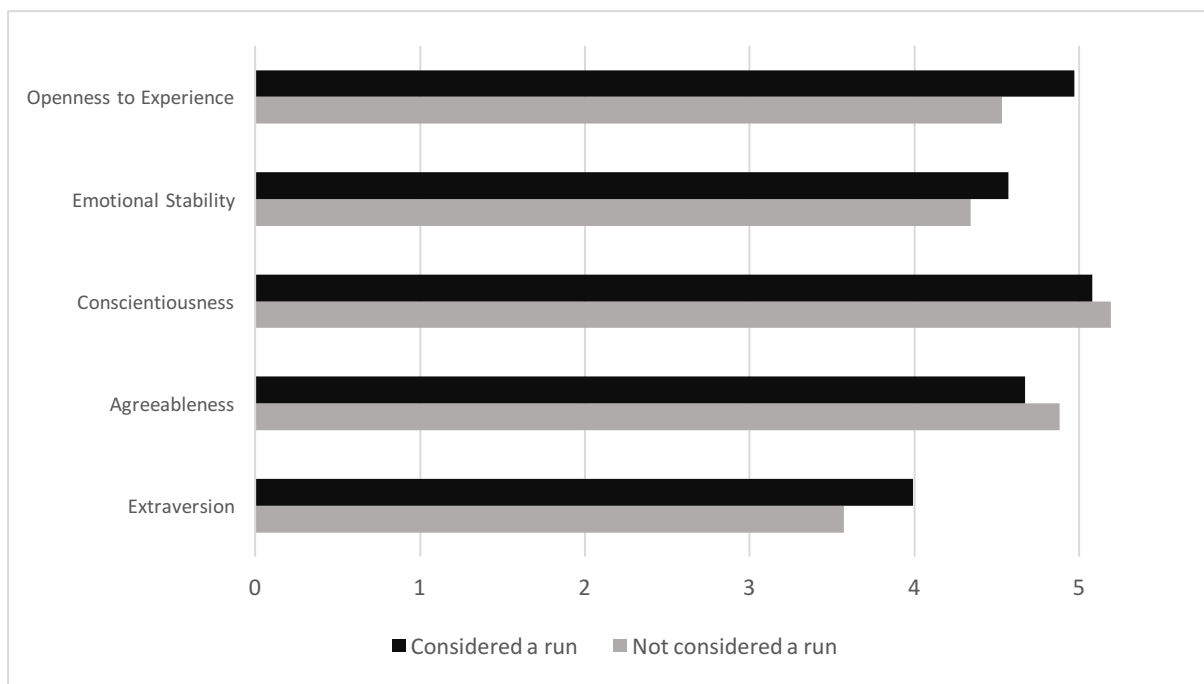


Figure 5 – Political ambition and the Big Five personality factors.

Figure 5 compares the mean score on each Big Five factor across the two groups – those who have considered putting themselves forward as a candidate for political

⁷ Gosling, S. D., Rentfrow, P. J., & Swann, W. B., Jr. (2003). A Very Brief Measure of the Big Five Personality Domains. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 37, 504-528.

office and those who have not. All of the differences shown in the figure are statistically significant. Respondents who have considered running for political office are higher in Openness to Experience, Extraversion, and Emotional Stability than those who have not. These findings are consistent with the expectations we discussed above. Conversely, respondents who have indicated that they are not politically ambitious are higher in Conscientiousness and Agreeableness. This latter pattern might be reflective of the fact that politics is, fundamentally, about conflict – conflicting ideas, suggestions, and solutions. Individuals uncomfortable with what this entails may well be those who seek to avoid conflict and who prefer stability and predictability. Overall, though, we can see that the politically ambitious in Britain are confident and outgoing. Although emotionally stable, they are not necessarily the kindest or the most sympathetic of people, and they are not especially dutiful or reliable compared to their unambitious compatriots. Whether this is a surprise or not likely depends on your view of our current crop of politicians.

Disaffection, disillusionment and (not) running for office

Although public disaffection and disillusionment with politics, politicians, and political institutions is hardly new, we don't know precisely how it affects political ambition. On one hand, the pessimist might assume that disaffection breeds non-participation: not voting, not campaigning, and certainly not running for office. On the other hand, the optimist might see in the depths of disillusionment a kernel of hope: instead of provoking apathy, dissatisfaction with the status quo might provoke a citizen to go out and get involved in an attempt to change the very system they dislike so much. Our data suggests that the pessimist is closer to the mark.

Generally, it seems that faith in politics and politicians is something of a prerequisite for expressing political ambition. Although this might sound like a truism, it should trouble those hoping for democratic outbursts in opposition to a seemingly perennially unpopular political class: from what we can tell, this is unlikely to occur. We asked respondents to indicate, on a five-point scale running from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' whether they felt that politicians did not care about people like them. Those who strongly disagreed were notably more ambitious than the average Briton, with 20% of this group ($n=272$) having considered running for political office. Similarly, 15% of those who tended to disagree that politicians didn't care about people like them ($n=1181$) had also considered a run. Conversely, just 9 and 11% of those who agreed ($n=3199$) and strongly agreed ($n=2501$) with the statement declared themselves to be politically ambitious. Turning to the issue of whether respondents had a lot of trust in MPs in general, we encounter the same broad patterns. Just 10 and 9% of those who disagreed ($n=3628$) and strongly disagreed ($n=2962$) with the statement, respectively, expressed some political ambition compared to 20% both of those who agreed ($n=699$) and strongly agreed ($n=135$), respectively. In other words, those smaller groups of respondents who express faith

in politicians' intentions and trust in them in more general terms are also more likely to have expressed some interest in running for political office.

Become a politician: normal people need not apply

People who run for office are strange. We don't mean this in a normative sense, but in the true sense of the word: they are unusual, abnormal, unlike most others. The pertinent question from a democratic standpoint is whether this abnormality is bound up with a wider set of socio-economic and characteristic differences between the politically ambitious and everybody else? In other words, are the differences we can see of such a kind that we should be concerned by the broader inequalities they seem to represent? Using our original data, we have shown that Britons who have shown some political ambition are different from those who have not in a number of ways that would seem to be politically pertinent:

- Men are more likely to be politically ambitious than women
- Individuals with higher levels of education are more politically ambitious than those without such high levels of education
- There is a north-south geographical divide in political ambition
- Personality traits like being more confident and having greater comfort with the unknown are more common among the politically ambitious than among others
- There is a filial-driven divide in ambition, whereby individuals whose parents were involved in politics while a person was growing up
- There is a class divide in political ambition, with individuals in higher social grades more likely to be ambitious than those in lower grades
- With the caveat that we have a limited sample size, there is evidence that certain ethnic minority groups have lower levels of political ambition than white respondents
- Individuals displaying low levels of trust in politicians and democracy as a whole are less likely to have considered putting themselves forward as a candidate for political office

Taken together, this evidence is indicative of a number of biases working against the development of political ambition among certain groups of the population and working in favour of others. Some of these biases are not surprising or novel; indeed, they are age old: a bias against women, a bias against lower class and lower status occupations, a bias against ethnic minorities, and a bias in favour of the wealthy south over the poorer north. Others are less obviously the result of existing social inequalities. For example, although parental involvement in politics probably does skew towards middle- and upper-class families, it might equally be seen in the historically working-class activity of trade union activism, though this particular route into Westminster has been in decline in recent decades following the collapse of heavy industry in the 1980s and the changing direction of the Labour party in the mid-1990s.

More than this, whether or not the bias in favour of certain personality traits is worthy of concern is questionable. On this point, we are agnostic. But overall, it is clear that the politically ambitious in Britain are unlike their fellow citizens in many important and politically salient ways.

This provokes the familiar question of what is to be done? The primary vehicle through which private citizens become publicly-elected politicians is the political party. Consequently, political parties carry a significant democratic responsibility that should see them seek to broaden their candidate pools and, more broadly, catalyse political ambition among the citizenry as a whole. Existing evidence would suggest that the best way that they can go about this task is to simply ask a wider range of individuals to consider running for political office.⁸ Furthermore, they can respond encouragingly whenever individuals bearing characteristics and backgrounds less commonly seen among the politically ambitious approach party representatives and engage in signalling behaviour regarding a prospective candidacy.⁹ Following an elongated period of decline in both membership and activity at the grassroots level, British political parties have undergone something of a mini-revival in the past two years. The rise of groups like Momentum, for example, have the potential to act as a bridge between groups who have traditionally been unambitious for formal political office and political parties. The extent to which they will fulfil this potential, however, is as yet unclear.

Perhaps of greater concern to policymakers whose efforts have generally focused on making political institutions themselves more egalitarian and open to members of traditionally under-represented groups is that this doesn't seem to have had the desired impact.¹⁰ Take the case of Scotland and Wales, for example. In 1999, new legislatures were formed in both of these countries that were seen to be considerably more family-friendly than Westminster, with childcare provision, flexible working hours, and a more collegiate atmosphere actively encouraged. On this basis, we might expect the gender gap in political ambition to be closed in these places, with women in both Scotland and Wales taking note of the more accessible, and desirable, institutions and subsequently being more interested in seeking election to them. Unfortunately, we find no such effect in our data. Of course, this is not to say that these efforts are not worthy of pursuit – they surely are – but they should not be considered a panacea or simple fix. Speculatively, it does not seem over the top to suggest that wider social change might be needed alongside valuable institutionally-

⁸ Broockman, D.E. (2014) 'Mobilizing candidates: Political actors strategically shape the candidate pool with personal appeals', *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 1(2): 104-119.

⁹ Allen, P. and Cutts, D. (2017) 'Aspirant Candidate Behaviour and Progressive Political Ambition', *Research & Politics* January-March, pp.1-9.

¹⁰ Allen, P., Cutts, D. and Winn, M., 2016. Understanding legislator experiences of family-friendly working practices in political institutions. *Politics & Gender*, 12(3), pp.549-572.

focused efforts like those outlined by Sarah Childs in her 2016 report, *The Good Parliament*.¹¹ The idiosyncracies of the Houses of Parliament, the flagship of British democracy, are unlikely to prove attractive to many.

We should not anticipate the collapse of our political institutions should political ambition become further concentrated in an even more limited group of citizens. This is unlikely. What we may expect, though, is an intensification of anti-political feeling and a perceived growth in the distance separating those involved in political life from those who are not. Neither of these things should be accepted as business as usual in a healthy democracy, and they should be resisted.

¹¹ <https://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2016/july/the-good-parliament-report-launched/>